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Effects of *in utero* exposure to polychlorinated biphenyls, methylmercury, and polyunsaturated fatty acids on birth size

Chihiro Miyashita [a], Seiko Sasaki [b], Tamiko Ikeno [a], Atsuko Araki [a], Sachiko Ito [a], Jumboku Kajiwara [c], Takashi Todaka [d], Noriyuki Hachiya [e], Akira Yasutake [f], Katsuyuki Murata [g], Tamie Nakajima [h], Reiko Kishi [a,*]

[a] Center for Environmental and Health Sciences, Hokkaido University, North 12 West 7 Kita-ku, Sapporo 060-0812, Japan
[b] Department of Public Health Sciences, Hokkaido University Graduate School of Medicine, North 15 West 7 Kita-ku, Sapporo 060-8638, Japan
[c] Fukuoka Institute of Health and Environmental Sciences, Mukaizano 39, Dazaifu 818-0135, Japan
[d] Kitakyushu Life Science Center, Public Interest Incorporated Foundation, 1-4 Nakabarushinmachi Tobata-ku Kitakyushu-shi, Fukuoka 804-0003, Japan
[e] Department of Epidemiology, National Institute for Minamata Disease, 4058-18 Hama, Kumamoto 867-0008, Japan
[f] Graduate School of Science and Technology, Kumamoto University, 2-39-1 Kurokami, Kumamoto 860-8555, Japan
[g] Department of Environmental Health Sciences, Akita University, Graduate School of Medicine, Akita 010-8543, Japan
[h] Department of Occupational and Environmental Health, Nagoya University Graduate School of Medicine, 65 Tsurumai-cho, Showa-ku, Nagoya 466-8550, Japan

HIGHLIGHTS

- The risk of small for gestational age by weight decreased with increasing hair mercury concentration.
- The concentrations of mercury in maternal hair had no association with birth weight.
- The concentrations of polychlorinated biphenyls in maternal blood had no association with birth size.

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ABSTRACT

The adverse effects of *in utero* exposure to polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) or methylmercury (MeHg), and the beneficial effects of nutrients from maternal fish intake might have opposing influences on fetal growth. In this study, we assessed the effects of *in utero* exposure to PCBs and MeHg on birth size in the Japanese population, which is known to have a high frequency of fish consumption. The concentrations of PCBs and polyunsaturated fatty acids in maternal blood, and the total mercury in hair (as a biomarker of MeHg exposure) were measured during pregnancy and at delivery. Maternal intakes of fish (subtypes: fatty and lean) and shellfishes were calculated from a food frequency questionnaire administered at delivery. Newborn anthropometric measurement data were obtained from birth records. The associations between chemical exposures and birth size were analyzed by using multiple regression analysis with adjustment for confounding factors among 367 mother–newborn pairs. The birth weight was 3073 ± 37 g (mean ± SD). The incidence of babies small for gestational age (SGA) by weight was 4.9%. The median concentrations of total PCBs and hair mercury were 108 ng/g lipid and 1.41 μg/g, respectively. There was no overall association between mercury concentrations and birth weight, birth length, chest circumference, and head circumference. We observed that the risk of SGA by weight decreased with increasing mercury concentration in regression analyses with adjustment for polyunsaturated fatty acids. Our results suggest that the beneficial effect of essential nutrition may mask the adverse effects of MeHg on birth size. The concentrations of PCBs had no association with birth size.

1. Introduction

Newborn anthropometric measurements (weight, length, and head and chest circumference) reflect fetal growth *in utero*, and are reported to predict infant survival, growth, morbidity, and neurobehavioral performance in early life (Kajantie et al., 2005; Barker, 2006). In Japan, public health concerns have been raised about a marked increase in the prevalence of babies with low birth weight, from 4.2% to 8.3% between 1980 and 2000 (Takimoto et al., 2005). Birth cohort studies reported

Abbreviations: BMI, body-mass index; B, partial regression coefficient; CI, confidence interval; FFQ, food-frequency questionnaire; Hg, mercury; MeHg, methylmercury; ND, not detectable; OR, odds ratio; SGA, small for gestational age; PCB, polychlorinated biphenyl; TEQ, toxic equivalent.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: rkishi@med.hokudai.ac.jp (R. Kishi).

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discrepant findings about the association between maternal intake of fish/seafood during pregnancy and birth size: some found a significant positive association (Olsen et al., 1990, 1993; Olsen and Secher, 2002; Thorsdottir et al., 2004; Drouillet-Pinard et al., 2010; Brantsaeter et al., 2012; Leventakou et al., 2014), whereas others found a null or negative association (Rylander et al., 2000; Oken et al., 2004; Guldner et al., 2007; Halldorsson et al., 2007; Mendez et al., 2010; Heppe et al., 2011).

A plausible explanation is that fish/seafood is a nutrient source of polyunsaturated fatty acids for the mother and, at the same time, exposes the fetus to polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) (Grandjean et al., 2001; Halldorsson et al., 2008; Papadopoulou et al., 2013) and methylmercury (MeHg) (Drouillet-Pinard et al., 2010; van Wijngaarden et al., 2014; Vejrup et al., 2014). The adverse effects of *in utero* exposure to environmental contaminants and the positive effects of the nutrients from fish might have opposing influences on fetal growth (Grandjean et al., 2001; Halldorsson et al., 2008; Papadopoulou et al., 2013). PCBs are classified as persistent organic pollutants as they are lipophilic, stable, and show widespread contamination in the environment, food web, and human tissues (Sonneborn et al., 2008). Hg in fish muscle is mostly present in the form of MeHg, which is bioconcentrated up through the aquatic food web, eventually resulting in exposure through the human diet (van Wijngaarden et al., 2014). Fetal exposure to PCBs and MeHg *in utero* has the potential for serious health concerns because these pollutants can cross the placental and blood–brain barriers to reach the immature fetal organs and tissues, which are particularly susceptible to the effects of these toxins (Zahir et al., 2005; National Research Council, 2000; Wojtyniak et al., 2010; Casas et al., 2015).

The toxic mechanism of action of PCBs has not yet been fully elucidated; however, it is suspected that their estrogenic activity may play a role (Decastro et al., 2006). Experimental studies have demonstrated that PCBs display endocrine-disrupting effects in their ability to stimulate estrogen and can also function as xenoestrogens (Bonefeld-Jorgensen et al., 2001; Cooke et al., 2001). Estrogenic and antiestrogenic PCBs may have opposite associations with infant anthropometrics (Cooke et al., 2001). Other adverse effects induced by PCBs include dioxin-like activities such as activation of aryl hydrocarbon receptors (Van den Berg et al., 2006), and the potential toxic effects induced by dioxin-like PCB congeners may be stronger than those of non-dioxin-like (NDL) congeners (Giesy and Kannan, 1998). On the other hand, in our previous study, we found that fish/seafood consumption was associated with the concentration of NDL congeners (Miyashita et al., 2015). PCB 153 has been the most frequently used indicator of the effects on fetuses of exposure to PCBs in epidemiological studies. In previous studies, specific PCB congeners 153, 156, 118, 74, and 77 had potential estrogenic and antiestrogenic activities (Cooke et al., 2001; Decastro et al., 2006) and significant associations with birth size (Wojtyniak et al., 2010; Casas et al., 2015).

Epidemiological studies have previously reported inconsistent findings about the effect of prenatal exposure to PCBs at background levels on birth weight: some found significant inverse associations (Patandin et al., 1998; Rylander et al., 1998; Karmaus and Zhu, 2004; Sagiv et al., 2007; Halldorsson et al., 2008; Sonneborn et al., 2008; Tan et al., 2009; Brucker-Davis et al., 2010; Papadopoulou et al., 2013), whereas others found a null or positive association (Vartiainen et al., 1998; Grandjean et al., 2001; Gladen et al., 2003; Longnecker et al., 2005; Givens et al., 2007; Khanjani and Sim, 2007; Wolff et al., 2007; Murphy et al., 2010; Lopez-Espinosa et al., 2011; Kezios et al., 2012; Lignell et al., 2013; Hisada et al., 2014). In populations exposed to relatively high MeHg levels because of high consumption of contaminated seafood or accidental poisoning, epidemiologic studies have reported that prenatal MeHg exposure can lead to harmful effects on children's health such as impaired neurobehavioral development, congenital malformations, and restriction of fetal growth (National Research Council, 2000). However, limited epidemiological studies reported no conclusive evidence on the effects of low-level MeHg exposure on birth size (Drouillet-Pinard et al., 2010; Gundacker et al., 2010; Ramirez et al., 2000; Ramon et al., 2009; van Wijngaarden et al., 2014; Vejrup et al., 2014; Zahir et al., 2005).

Moreover, a balance of the opposite effects of contaminants and fish/seafood intakes across populations consuming different types of fish/seafood may have resulted in the discrepant finding among the previous birth cohort studies (Mahaffey, 2004; Halldorsson et al., 2008; Ramon et al., 2009). A meta-analysis study including 19 European cohorts described that the most pronounced effect on birth weight was observed for fatty fish, which is known to be a main source of long-chain polyunsaturated fatty acids (LCPUFAs) (Leventakou et al., 2014). Systematic reviews have suggested that maternal intake of omega-3 fatty acid supplements during pregnancy is associated with small but significant increases in infant birth size (Makrides et al., 2006; Szajewska et al., 2006; Salvig and Lamont, 2011). However, in some Asian countries, including Japan, where there is a high frequency of fish consumption (Miyashita et al., 2015), there is insufficient evidence about the effect of *in utero* exposure to PCBs and MeHg on birth size.

Thus, the aim of this study is to assess the effects of prenatal exposure to PCBs and MeHg on newborn anthropometric measurements, as well as the incidence of babies born small for gestational age (SGA), taking into account the biomarker of LCPUFAs among Japanese pregnant women.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study population

The subjects in this study were all currently enrolled in the Hokkaido Study on Environment and Children's Health. A total of 514 pregnant Japanese women were recruited at the Sapporo Toho Hospital in Hokkaido, Japan, from July 2002 to September 2005 (Kishi et al., 2013). An overview of this study is shown in Fig. 1. During their last trimester, the subjects completed a self-administered questionnaire on demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status, tobacco smoking and alcohol habits, and frequency of consumption during pregnancy of food items such as shoreline fish (*e.g.*, saury, Pacific herring, or mackerel), pelagic fish (*e.g.*, tuna, bonito, or salmon), beef, pork, chicken, milk, and eggs. The medical records for 504 mother–newborn pairs were used to gather information on delivery characteristics, including maternal height, maternal prepregnancy weight, pregnancy complications, gestational age, infant sex, parity, congenital anomalies, and newborn anthropometric measurements.

Within 5 days after delivery, the mothers completed a food frequency questionnaire (FFQ) to estimate their fish/seafood intake and history of synthetic hair waving ($n = 430$). The FFQ provided information about the frequency and portion size for maternal fish intake (Supplementary Table 1). The estimated daily fish intake (g/day) was calculated from the FFQ (Yasutake et al., 2003). We divided maternal fish intake to four subtypes: fatty fish, lean fish, shellfishes, and whole. The fatty fish group consisted of tuna, salmon, yellowtail, sardine, mackerel, saury, eel, Atka mackerel, shishamo smelt, pacific herring, and trout. The lean fish group included bonito, sea bream, flatfish, flounder, horse mackerel, carp, sweetfish, crucian carp, and Pacific cod. The shellfishes group included cuttlefish, octopus, crab, shrimp, shellfish, and fish products (Leventakou et al., 2014).

This study was conducted with written informed consent from all subjects and was approved by the institutional ethics board for epidemiological studies at the Hokkaido University Graduate School of Medicine.

2.2. Exposure assessment

A 40-mL blood sample was taken from the maternal peripheral vein during the last trimester. In subjects with pregnancy-related anemia, the samples were taken during hospitalization immediately after delivery. Consequently, 356 samples were taken during pregnancy and 148

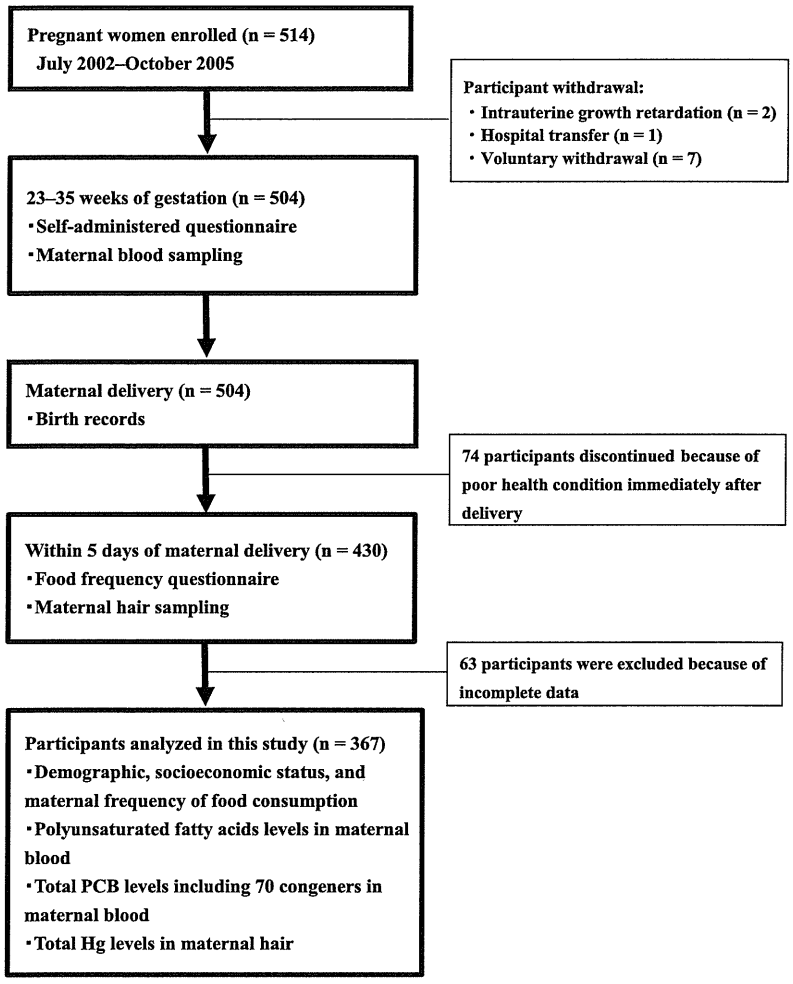

Fig. 1. Research overview.

samples were taken after delivery. All samples were stored at −80 °C until needed for analysis. The extraction, purification, and analysis of PCBs from whole blood specimens were performed by using a previously reported method (Iida and Todaka, 2003; Todaka et al., 2008a,2008b). The concentrations of PCBs were analyzed at the Fukuoka Institute of Health and Environmental Sciences by using high-resolution gas chromatography/high-resolution mass spectrometry of 5-g blood samples. To evaluate the accuracy and reliability of the PCB analysis, quality control studies were completed and compared against those done at three other laboratories. The average variation among the concentrations of PCBs in human blood samples was considered acceptable if it was within 10% (Kajiwara et al., 2008, 2009). The concentrations of 70 PCBs congeners were measured in 426 blood samples and adjusted for lipids (pg/g lipid). The sample values below the detection limit for the 70 PCBs congeners were assigned a value of one-half the detection limit. The remaining samples were not analyzed because of unavailable or insufficient sample volumes (<5 g) for measurement. PCB congeners were separated into four groups based on their suggested biological activities and the effect of exposure to them due to fish intake: estrogenic, antiestrogenic, dioxin-like, and NDL PCBs (Cooke et al., 2001). The estrogenic group included congeners 4, 10, 5, 8, 15, 17, 18, 31, 44, 47, 48, 52, 70, 99, 101, 136, 153, and 188. The antiestrogenic group included congeners 77, 110, 105, 114, 126, 156, 171, and 169. The dioxin-like PCBs included congeners 77, 81, 105, 114, 118, 123, 126, 156, 157, 167, 169, and 189 (Van den Berg et al., 2006). NDL PCBs had 58 congeners excluding the 12 dioxin-like PCBs from all 70 congeners measured in our study (Supplementary Table 2) (Miyashita et al., 2015). Additionally, we used the specific PCB congeners 153 (main contributor), 156, 118, 74, and 77 as biomarkers of exposure to PCBs.

Maternal hair was collected within 5 days after delivery (n = 430). For the 1 cm of hair closest to the scalp, the concentrations of total Hg were determined by using the oxygen combustion-gold amalgamation method with the MD-1 atomic absorption detector (Nippon Instruments Co., Ltd., Osaka, Japan) at the National Institute for Minamata Disease (Yasutake et al., 2003). The total Hg concentration in hair was used as a convenient biomarker of MeHg exposure (van Wijngaarden et al., 2014) because >90% of the total Hg in hair is MeHg that is covalently bound to the cysteine residue of hair protein (National Research Council, 2000).

2.3. Maternal polyunsaturated fatty acid assessment

The fatty acid levels in maternal whole blood were determined by using gas chromatography–mass spectrometry (GC–MS) as described in detail in our previous study (Nakashima et al., 2013). Briefly, whole blood lipid was extracted from 25 μL blood (Folch et al., 1957), mixed with 1.2 mL methanol, 75 μL acetyl chloride, and 75 μL of 10 μg/100 μL tricosanoic acid ethyl ester/methanol (internal standard). After adding *n*-hexane (500 μL) and centrifugation of the sample, the upper organic layer was collected and transferred into another vial. The *n*-hexane

Table 1
Maternal and infant characteristics (n = 367).

Characteristics	n (%)
Maternal characteristics	
Age at delivery (years)	30.8 ± 4.8[a]
Height (cm)	158 ± 5.4[a]
Prepregnancy maternal weight (kg)	52.5 ± 8.0[a]
Parity	
0	180 (49.0)
1	146 (39.8)
2	35 (9.5)
3	6 (1.6)
Blood sampling period	
<28 weeks	21 (5.7)
28 to <36 weeks	148 (40.3)
≥36 weeks	78 (21.3)
After delivery	120 (32.7)
History of chemical hair waving	
No	260 (70.8)
Yes	107 (29.2)
Education level (years)	
≤9	7 (1.9)
10–12	147 (40.1)
13–16	208 (56.7)
≥17	5 (1.4)
Annual household income (million yen)	
<3	61 (16.6)
3 to <5	183 (49.9)
5 to <7	78 (21.3)
≥7	45 (12.3)
Tobacco smoking during pregnancy	
Nonsmoker	305 (83.1)
Smoker	62 (16.9)
Alcohol consumption during pregnancy	
No	255 (69.5)
Yes	112 (30.5)
Caffeine intake during pregnancy (mg/day)	120 (1.50, 646)[b]
Frequency of food consumption during pregnancy	
Shoreline fish	
<Once/week	198 (54.0)
≥Once/week	169 (46.0)
Pelagic fish	
<Once/week	171 (46.6)
≥Once/week	196 (53.4)
Beef	
<Once/week	274 (75.3)
≥Once/week	90 (24.7)
Pork	
<Once/week	274 (75.3)
≥Once/week	90 (24.7)
Chicken	
<Once/week	30 (8.2)
≥Once/week	337 (91.8)
Egg	
<Once/week	53 (14.4)
≥Once/week	314 (85.6)
Milk	
<Once/week	10 (2.7)
≥Once/week	356 (97.3)
Fish intake from food frequency questionnaires	
Fish intake (g/day)	38.8 (0.0, 400)[b]
Fatty fish	23.3 (0.0, 160)[b]
Lean fish	0.0 (0.0, 66.7)[b]
Shellfish	11.1 (0.0, 200)[b]
Whale	0.0 (0.0, 6.70)[b]
Infant characteristics	
Sex	
Male	173 (47.1)
Female	194 (52.9)
Type of delivery	
Vaginal birth	292 (79.3)
Cesarean section	76 (20.7)
Gestational age at birth (weeks)	39.0 ± 1.4[a]
Birth weight (g)	3073 ± 37[a]
Length (cm)	48.1 ± 1.9[a]
Chest circumference (cm)	31.5 ± 1.6[a]
Head circumference (cm)	33.3 ± 1.3[a]
SGA by weight	18 (4.9)
SGA by length	43 (11.7)

Notes to Table 1
SGA: small for gestational age.
[a] Mean ± SD.
[b] Median (minimum, maximum).

Table 2
Concentrations of LCPUFA (μg/mL) in maternal blood (n = 367).

		Percentile			
	Minimum	25th	50th	75th	Maximum
EPA + DHA	3.0	20.5	32.2	47.8	163
AA	2.8	43.5	61.2	89.7	219
Omega-3 fatty acids	4.1	28.2	43.4	63.9	188
Omega-6 fatty acids	16.1	581	798	1030	2840

LCPUFA: long-chain polyunsaturated fatty acids; EPA: eicosapentaenoic acid; DHA: docosahexaenoic acid; AA: arachidonic acid; Omega-3 fatty acids: EPA, DHA, α-linolenic acid (ALA); Omega-6 fatty acids: AA, linoleic acid (LA).

extraction was repeated once, and then the concentration of fatty acid methyl ester in the *n*-hexane layer was measured with GC–MS. Finally, nine fatty acid species were measured including the omega-6 fatty acids, palmitoleic and oleic acids, linoleic acid, and arachidonic acid (AA), and the omega-3 fatty acids, α-linolenic acid, eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA), and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA). The detection rates for eight fatty acids were >99.0% and that for EPA was 97.8% (Kishi et al., 2015). We used EPA + DHA, AA, omega-3 fatty acids, and omega-6 fatty acids as biomarkers of maternal LCPUFAs (van Wijngaarden et al., 2014; Vejrup et al., 2014).

2.4. Statistical analyses

Some subjects were excluded from analyses because of pregnancy-induced hypertension (n = 11), diabetes mellitus (n = 1), fetal heart failure (n = 1), and multiple births (n = 7). The final study population comprised 367 mother–newborn pairs with completed questionnaire data and birth records, whose PCB and hair Hg concentrations were measured (Fig. 1). SGA by weight was defined as a birth weight less than the 10th percentile for the gestational age at delivery, based on growth charts specific for newborn sex and maternal parity for birth size standards by gestational age for Japanese neonates. SGA by length was defined as birth length less than the 10th percentile for the gestational age at delivery, based on growth charts for birth size standards by gestational age for Japanese neonates (Itabashi et al., 2014). Associations between subject characteristics and concentrations of PCBs and hair Hg were evaluated by using the Mann–Whitney *U*-test and Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. Associations between subject characteristics and birth size were evaluated by using Student's *t*-test, Pearson correlation, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient, and one-way analysis of variance. For linear regression analyses, we used $\log_{10}$-transformed values for concentrations of PCBs and hair Hg, as well as LCPUFAs, because these variables displayed a skewed distribution. Associations between PCBs or hair Hg (expressed as continuous concentrations) and newborn anthropometric measurements were evaluated by using linear regression analyses. For logistic regression analyses, we used concentrations of PCBs and hair Hg, divided into quartiles, to evaluate potential nonlinear relationships. The associations between PCBs or hair Hg and the incidence of babies born SGA by weight and length were evaluated by using logistic regression analyses. All regression analyses were conducted with or without adjustment of factors—chosen for their significant associations with exposure and birth size in this study ($p < 0.05$)—and possible confounding factors as reported in previous studies (Drouillet-Pinard et al., 2010; Halldorsson et al., 2008; Ramon et al., 2009; Papadopoulou et al., 2013; van Wijngaarden et al., 2014; Vejrup et al., 2014). Specifically, the adjusted factors included maternal age (continuous), height (continuous), prepregnancy weight (continuous), smoking during pregnancy (yes/no), alcohol consumption during

pregnancy (yes/no), household income (less than or greater than 5 million Yen annually), blood sampling period (during pregnancy or after delivery), birth order (first-born or later children) reported as maternal parity, infant sex, gestational age, maternal LCPUFAs, and total 70 PCBs or hair Hg. The logistic regression analysis for SGA by weight was not adjusted for birth order, infant sex, and gestational age, because SGA by weight was defined based on growth charts for birth size standards by gestational age specific for newborn sex and maternal parity. Furthermore, the logistic regression analysis for SGA by length was not adjusted for gestational age, because SGA by length was defined based on growth charts for birth size standards by gestational age.

A p-value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant. Statistical analyses were performed by using the Statistics Package for Social Sciences (version 19.0 J; IBM, Armonk, NY, USA) software for Windows.

3. Results

The subjects' characteristics are described in Table 1. The percentage of babies born SGA by weight was 4.9% and that of babies SGA by length was 11.7%. Table 2 shows the distribution of maternal biomarkers of fatty acid. The median concentration of the total 70 PCBs in the maternal blood was 108 ng/g lipid (Supplementary Table 2). The distributions of PCB concentrations are shown in Table 3. The geometric mean concentrations of estrogenic, antiestrogenic, dioxin-like, and NDL PCBs were 27.9, 3.98, 10.9, and 93.8 ng/g lipid, respectively, and that of hair Hg was 1.34 μg/g. The concentrations of total PCBs significantly increased with maternal age and intake of fish, EPA + DHA, and omega-3 fatty acids during pregnancy. The concentrations of hair Hg significantly increased with fish intake during pregnancy (Table 4). The concentrations of the total 70 PCBs and hair Hg in subjects with no history of parity; high household income; frequent consumption of pelagic fish, beef, or milk (≥once/week); or for non-SGA babies by weight were significantly higher than those in subjects with a history of parity; low income; infrequent consumption of pelagic fish, beef, or milk; or SGA babies by weight, respectively (Table 4). The newborn anthropometric measurements significantly increased with maternal height, prepregnancy weight, male sex, birth by vaginal delivery, and increasing gestational age (Supplementary Table 3). Incidences of SGA babies by weight and length significantly reduced with increased maternal prepregnancy weight and male sex (Supplementary Table 4).

We found no associations between the concentrations of estrogenic PCBs, antiestrogenic PCBs, dioxin-like PCBs, NDL PCBs, or hair Hg and newborn anthropometric measurements of birth weight, length, chest circumference, and head circumference in the multiple linear regression models with or without adjustment for factors (Supplementary Table 5). As shown in Table 5, we found no significant associations of SGA by weight with any quartile of estrogenic, antiestrogenic, dioxin-like, or NDL PCB levels, for all models. We also found no significant associations between the incidence of SGA by length and levels of estrogenic PCBs, antiestrogenic PCBs, dioxin-like PCBs, NDL PCBs, and hair Hg in all models. The adjusted odds ratios (ORs) for SGA by weight among the third (OR: 0.12, 95% confidence interval [95% CI]: 0.02–0.68), and fourth quartiles (OR: 0.17, 95% CI: 0.04–0.79) for hair Hg significantly reduced as compared with those in the first quartile (reference) with a significant trend (Table 5). The overall results analyzed by using regression analyses remained statistically significant after adjusting for omega-3 fatty acids (Table 5, Supplementary Table 5), and EPA + DHA, AA, omega-6 fatty acids, fish intake, fatty fish intake, and frequent consumption of pelagic fish, beef, and milk (data not shown). Additionally, we found no interaction effect of PCBs or Hg and omega-3 fatty acids on SGA risk (Table 5), as well as EPA + DHA, AA, and omega-6 fatty acids on birth weight, birth length, chest circumference, head circumference, and SGA risk (data not shown).

PCB 153, 156, 118, and 74 were detected in all subjects, and PCB 77 was detected in 64% of the subjects. The median concentrations of PCB 153, 156, 118, 74, and 77 were 21.4, 1.95, 5.78, 3.12, and 0.011 ng/g lipid, respectively. The contribution rates of PCB 153, 156, 118, 74, and 77 according to total PCBs were 20.3%, 1.8%, 5.4%, 3.0%, and 0.01%, respectively. PCB 153 was the main contributor to PCB exposure in this study (Supplementary Table 2). In congener-specific analyses, after sample values below the detection limit were assigned a value of one-half the detection limit, associations between PCB 153, 156, 118, 74, or 77 and birth size were evaluated by regression analyses with adjustment for confounding factors. There were no associations between concentrations of specific PCB congeners and newborn anthropometric measurements or the incidence of babies born SGA in any of the regression analyses (data not shown).

Table 3
Concentrations of polychlorinated biphenyls in maternal blood (PCBs; ng/g lipid) and hair mercury (μg/g) in maternal samples (n = 367).

		Percentile			
	Minimum	25th	50th	75th	Maximum
Estrogenic PCBs[a]	3.88	19.5	28.7	40.0	147
Antiestrogenic PCBs[b]	0.63	2.75	4.13	5.60	21.7
Dioxin-like PCBs[c]	1.74	7.51	11.2	15.6	49.8
Non-dioxin-like PCBs	16.0	64.8	95.7	133	445
Hair Hg	0.24	0.96	1.41	1.89	4.73

[a] PCB 52, 49, 47, 44, 70, 95, 101, 99, 110, and 153 (Cooke et al., 2001).
[b] PCB 37, 77, 81, 126, 169, 114, 105, and 156 (Cooke et al., 2001).
[c] PCB 77, 81, 105, 114, 118, 123, 126, 156, 157, 167, 169, and 189 (Van den Berg et al., 2006).

4. Discussion

4.1. Prenatal exposure to PCBs and birth size

We found that prenatal exposure to PCBs, including antiestrogenic PCBs as well as specific PCB congeners, has no association with newborn anthropometric measurements at birth, or the incidence of babies born SGA after adjusting for confounding factors, including hair Hg, demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status, and maternal level of LCPUFAs. Similar results were obtained when examining only subjects with a normal birth weight and gestation period.

Median concentrations of PCB 153 have been reported with a wide range, from 10.7 ng/g lipid weight in a Poland cohort to 450 ng/g lipid in the maternal serum of a Faroe Island cohort (Grandjean et al., 2001; Hertz-Picciotto et al., 2005; Sonneborn et al., 2008; Wojtyniak et al., 2010). Concerning the exposure levels among the general population in Japan, the maternal PCB 153 level of 21.0 ng/g lipid in this study seemed to be comparable to that of 15.9 ng/g lipid (Nakamura et al., 2008) and 16.0 ng/g lipid (Hisada et al., 2014) measured in pregnant women in previous studies. Hisada et al. (2014) described that no association was observed between prenatal exposure to PCBs and birth size, and the levels of PCB exposure among the general population in this study was considerably lower than that among European (Wojtyniak et al., 2010) and American populations (Hertz-Picciotto et al., 2005), in which a significant negative association with prenatal exposure to PCBs and birth size was found. Therefore, one of the reasons for the inconsistent results may be the difference in PCB exposure level. Murphy et al. (2010) reported no association between prenatal exposure to antiestrogenic PCBs and birth weight of newborns of fish anglers, which is consistent with our findings. The estrogenic/antiestrogenic activities of PCBs have been demonstrated in *in vitro* and *in vivo* models; however, their affinity for estrogens and xenoestrogens are two to five times lower than that of natural hormones (Decastro et al., 2006). This suggests that the concentrations of estrogenic/antiestrogenic PCBs in our study may not be at levels too low to see any adverse effects on birth size but rather indicate a true biological effect.

A European meta-analysis with a pooled dataset including populations with a low PCB exposure described that birth weight reduced because of PCB 153 in cord serum (El Majidi et al., 2012; Casas et al., 2015).

Table 4
Total polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and hair mercury (Hg) levels in relation to maternal and infant characteristics and polyunsaturated fatty acids (n = 367).

Characteristics		Total PCBs (ng/g lipid)		Hair Hg (μg/g)	
		r	Median (min, max)	r	Median (min, max)
Maternal characteristics					
Age at delivery (years)		0.415[a**]		0.094[a]	
Height (cm)		0.079[a]		−0.055[a]	
Prepregnancy weight (kg)		0.016[a]		−0.029[a]	
Parity	0		115 (19.6, 495)*		1.41 (0.30, 3.73)*
	≥1		102 (17.8, 354)		1.38 (0.24, 4.73)
Blood sampling period	During pregnancy		110 (17.8, 363)		1.41 (0.24, 4.73)
	After delivery		104 (27.4, 495)		1.40 (0.30, 4.30)
History of chemical hair waving	No		108 (17.8, 495)		1.37 (0.24, 4.35)
	Yes		109 (19.6, 362)		1.46 (0.30, 4.73)
Education level (years)	≤12		99.0 (17.8, 363)		1.33 (0.24, 4.35)
	>12		111 (19.6, 495)		1.42 (0.30, 4.73)
Annual household income (million yen)	<5		102 (17.8, 362)*		1.28 (0.24, 4.73)*
	≥5		123 (27.4, 495)		1.47 (0.30, 4.33)
Tobacco smoking during pregnancy	Nonsmoker		110 (17.8, 362)		1.41 (0.30, 4.35)
	Smoker		95.4 (19.6, 495)		1.39 (0.24, 4.73)
Alcohol consumption during pregnancy	No		100 (17.8, 354)		1.33 (0.31, 4.03)
	Yes		113 (27.8, 495)		1.42 (0.24, 4.73)
Caffeine intake (mg/day)		0.017[a]		−0.005[a]	
Frequency of food consumption during pregnancy					
Shoreline fish	<Once/week		101 (17.8, 362)		1.31 (0.31, 4.35)
	≥Once/week		113 (19.6, 495)		1.46 (0.24, 4.73)
Pelagic fish	<Once/week		106 (17.8, 362)		1.24 (0.24, 4.03)**
	≥Once/week		109 (27.4, 495)		1.49 (0.32, 4.73)
Beef	<Once/week		108 (17.8, 363)		1.34 (0.24, 4.73)*
	≥Once/week		107 (19.6, 495)		1.51 (0.30, 3.69)
Pork	<Once/week		85.9 (19.6, 302)		1.54 (0.66, 4.03)
	≥Once/week		109 (17.8, 495)		1.39 (0.24, 4.73)
Chicken	<Once/week		108 (31.3, 362)		1.30 (0.37, 4.03)
	≥Once/week		108 (17.8, 495)		1.41 (0.24, 4.73)
Egg	<Once/week		102 (59.0, 213)		1.28 (1.19, 1.49)
	≥Once/week		108 (17.8, 495)		1.41 (0.24, 4.73)
Milk	<Once/week		74.9 (30.2, 354)**		1.24 (0.45, 3.09)
	≥Once/week		111 (17.8, 495)		1.42 (0.24, 4.73)
Food frequency questionnaires at delivery					
Fish intake (g/day)		0.187[a**]		0.215[a**]	
Fatty fish (g/day)		0.141[a**]		0.210[a**]	
Shellfish (g/day)		0.087[a]		0.084[a]	
LCPUFA in maternal blood					
EPA + DHA		0.182[a**]		0.056[a]	
AA		0.048[a]		−0.077[a]	
Omega-3 fatty acids		0.155[a**]		0.022[a]	
Omega-6 fatty acids		0.073[a]		−0.018[a]	
Infant characteristics					
Sex	Male		111 (27.4, 362)		1.41 (0.24, 4.35)
	Female		104 (17.8, 495)		1.39 (0.30, 4.73)
Type of delivery	Vaginal birth		109 (17.8, 363)		1.43 (0.24, 4.73)
	Cesarean section		97.0 (19.6, 495)		1.24 (0.30, 4.35)
Gestational age (weeks)		0.025[a]		0.017[a]	
SGA by weight	No		108 (17.8, 495)		1.42 (0.30, 4.73)*
	Yes		98.7 (51.0, 223)		0.92 (0.24, 2.62)
SGA by length	No		109 (17.8, 495)		1.41 (0.24, 4.73)
	Yes		97 (19.6, 247)		1.24 (0.46, 3.55)

LCPUFA: long-chain polyunsaturated fatty acids, EPA: eicosapentaenoic acid, DHA: docosahexaenoic acid, AA: arachidonic acid.
[a] r: Spearman's rank correlation coefficient.
* $p < 0.05$ by Mann–Whitney *U*-test and Spearman's rank correlation test.
** $p < 0.01$ by Mann–Whitney *U*-test and Spearman's rank correlation test.

However, a systematic analysis of 20 epidemiological studies described that the observed discrepancies in the concentration–response relation between prenatal PCB exposure and birth weight could not be attributed conclusively to a difference in biological PCB levels (El Majidi et al., 2012). In fact, in Inuit children exposed to high concentrations of PCBs, a lack of association between PCB 153 in cord blood and birth size was observed (Dallaire et al., 2014). As one of the possible explanations, the beneficial nutrients from fish/seafood intake may have an opposite action to the toxic effects of PCBs (Mahaffey, 2004; Halldorsson et al., 2008; Ramon et al., 2009). In the Danish National Birth Cohort of subjects with 70 ng/g lipid of the median PCB 153 and 5 g/day of median fatty fish intake from the FFQ, inverse associations were observed between maternal PCB levels and birth weight (Halldorsson et al., 2008). In a Faroe Island cohort of subjects, higher concentrations of PCB 153 and PUFAs than that in our study were found, and a negative effect of maternal EPA and no effect of PCB exposure on birth weight were observed (Grandjean et al., 2001). We found no association between maternal levels of LCPUFAs and birth weight, birth length, chest circumference, and head circumference or SGA risk in this study. However, our previous study on the same cohort suggested that maternal EPA might affect infant chest circumference (Jia et al., 2014). It is difficult to compare our results with those of other studies because of substantial differences in the exposure levels, profiles of fish/seafood intake, and contribution rate of fish/seafood to the overall PCB exposure

Table 5
Odds ratios for babies born small for gestational age (n = 367).

		SGA by weight			SGA by length		
		Crude	Adjusted 1[a]	Adjusted 2[a]	Crude	Adjusted 1[b]	Adjusted 2[b]
		OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)		OR (95% CI)
Estrogenic PCBs	Quartile 1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Quartile 2	0.41 (0.10–1.65)	0.51 (0.11–2.30)	0.56 (0.12–2.58)	1.21 (0.53–2.79)	1.48 (0.60–3.67)	1.57 (0.62–4.00)
	Quartile 3	0.27 (0.05–1.34)	0.40 (0.07–2.24)	0.42 (0.07–2.41)	0.38 (0.13–1.14)	0.36 (0.11–1.17)	0.37 (0.11–1.22)
	Quartile 4	0.85 (0.27–2.62)	1.95 (0.46–8.18)	1.88 (0.45–7.83)	1.00 (0.42–2.36)	0.81 (0.28–2.29)	0.68 (0.23–2.03)
	p for trend	0.662	0.694	0.696	0.509	0.334	0.197
	P for interaction			0.335			0.211
Antiestrogenic PCBs	Quartile 1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Quartile 2	0.99 (0.28–3.54)	1.16 (0.29–4.68)	1.31 (0.32–5.34)	1.31 (0.56–3.05)	1.44 (0.58–3.57)	1.53 (0.61–3.84)
	Quartile 3	0.57 (0.13–2.47)	0.99 (0.20–4.87)	1.07 (0.21–5.47)	0.50 (0.18–1.42)	0.52 (0.17–1.63)	0.50 (0.16–1.57)
	Quartile 4	1.00 (0.28–3.58)	1.95 (0.44–8.55)	1.89 (0.43–8.29)	1.10 (0.46–2.65)	1.07 (0.38–2.98)	0.94 (0.32–2.73)
	p for trend	0.824	0.523	0.511	0.71	0.718	0.550
	P for interaction			0.317			0.249
Dioxin-like PCBs	Quartile 1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Quartile 2	1.23 (0.36–4.18)	1.54 (0.39–6.05)	1.93 (0.48–7.77)	1.34 (0.57–3.13)	1.62 (0.64–4.09)	1.79 (0.70–4.56)
	Quartile 3	0.38 (0.07–2.02)	0.66 (0.11–4.06)	0.64 (0.10–4.01)	0.60 (0.22–1.62)	0.68 (0.22–2.07)	0.62 (0.20–1.94)
	Quartile 4	1.01 (0.28–3.62)	2.20 (0.48–10.1)	2.01 (0.44–9.19)	1.01 (0.42–2.47)	1.01 (0.35–2.90)	0.83 (0.28–2.48)
	p for trend	0.669	0.570	0.560	0.617	0.714	0.260
	P for interaction			0.155			0.096
Non-dioxin like PCBs	Quartile 1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Quartile 2	0.48 (0.12–1.97)	0.56 (0.12–2.59)	0.57 (0.12–2.65)	1.71 (0.73–3.99)	1.99 (0.79–5.01)	2.02 (0.79–5.17)
	Quartile 3	0.81 (0.24–2.77)	1.36 (0.32–5.69)	1.47 (0.34–6.42)	0.47 (0.15–1.42)	0.49 (0.15–1.64)	0.49 (0.14–1.66)
	Quartile 4	0.64 (0.18–2.36)	1.21 (0.24–6.22)	1.18 (0.23–5.96)	1.21 (0.50–2.97)	1.00 (0.33–3.05)	0.88 (0.28–2.76)
	p for trend	0.654	0.759	0.752	0.697	0.483	0.345
	P for interaction			0.417			0.461
Hair Hg	Quartile 1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Quartile 2	0.28 (0.07–1.04)	0.24 (0.06–1.00)	0.22 (0.05–0.94)*	0.68 (0.29–1.62)	0.69 (0.27–1.76)	0.71 (0.27–1.84)
	Quartile 3	0.18 (0.04–0.86)*	0.12 (0.02–0.68)*	0.11 (0.02–0.64)*	0.60 (0.25–1.47)	0.58 (0.22–1.54)	0.57 (0.21–1.55)
	Quartile 4	0.28 (0.07–1.05)	0.17 (0.04–0.79)*	0.16 (0.03–0.77)*	0.69 (0.29–1.64)	0.65 (0.24–1.76)	0.61 (0.22–1.73)
	p for trend	0.023	0.014	0.014	0.359	0.362	0.324
	P for interaction			0.965			0.562

The odds ratios (OR) and 95% confidence intervals (95% CI) for babies born small for gestational age (SGA) were calculated by using the first quartile as the reference category.
p for trend: linear trend across quartiles.
Adjusted 1[a]: adjusted for maternal age, maternal height, prepregnancy maternal weight, tobacco smoking during pregnancy, alcohol consumption during pregnancy, household income, blood sampling period, and total PCBs or hair Hg.
Adjusted 2[a]: adjusted for omega-3 fatty acids in addition to the adjusted factors in Adjusted 1[a]
Adjusted 1[b]: adjusted for maternal age, maternal height, prepregnancy maternal weight, tobacco smoking during pregnancy, alcohol consumption during pregnancy, household income, blood sampling period, parity, infant sex, and total PCBs or hair Hg.
Adjusted 2[b]: adjusted for omega-3 fatty acids in addition to the adjusted factors in Adjusted 1[b]
P for interaction: introduced for interaction terms of quartile PCBs or quartile Hg, and quartile omega-3 fatty acids, in addition to the adjusted factors in Adjusted 2[a] or Adjusted 2[b].
* $p < 0.05$.

level. However, we have provided additional data to support the finding that low exposure to PCBs is likely insufficient to cause a negative effect on fetal growth taking into account maternal LCPUFAs.

4.2. Prenatal exposure to MeHg and birth size

Our findings suggest that prenatal exposure to MeHg has no association with newborn anthropometric measurements, although the incidence of babies born SGA by weight may reduce with higher concentrations of Hg in hair. The maternal hair Hg level of 1.41 μg/g at delivery in our population was comparable to that of 1.96 μg/g (Suzuki et al., 2010) and 1.62 μg/g in pregnant women (Sakamoto et al., 2012), and that of 1.43 μg/g in nonpregnant women from the general population in Japan (Yasutake et al., 2003), in which the effect on birth size was not evaluated.

Our finding is consistent with the results of several epidemiological studies that also showed a lack of significant association between parental exposure to MeHg and birth weight (Drouillet-Pinard et al., 2010; Gundacker et al., 2010; Ramirez et al., 2000; Ramon et al., 2009; van Wijngaarden et al., 2014). However, two different studies described adverse effects from prenatal exposure to MeHg in relation to birth size taking into account maternal fish intake (Ramon et al., 2009; Vejrup et al., 2014). In a study in Spain in which the subjects had a mean total Hg of 9.4 μg/L in cord blood and a mean fish intake of 36 g/day, the concentrations of total Hg increased with reduced birth weight and increased the risk of being born SGA for length but not SGA for weight (Ramon et al., 2009). One possible explanation for the inconsistent findings is that the subjects of our study more frequently consumed fatty fish than the subjects of the Spanish study. Fatty fish is known to be the main source of PUFAs (Leventakou et al., 2014). In study in the Republic of Seychelles on subjects with a mean hair MeHg of 5.9 μg/g and a median omega-3 fatty acid level of 30 μg/mL, no association was observed between MeHg or PUFAs and birth weight (van Wijngaarden et al., 2014). In a Norwegian study of subjects with 1.45 μg/day median estimated dietary Hg and 6 g/day fatty fish intake, a positive effect of maternal fish/seafood intake and a negative effect of Hg exposure on birth weight were observed (Vejrup et al., 2014). Our study subjects had 23.3 g/day median fatty fish intake and 43 μg/mL median omega-3 fatty acids, which were higher than that found in the Seychelles and Norwegian studies. The beneficial effect of essential nutrition in our study may mask the adverse effects of MeHg on birth size, as observed in the Norwegian study.

On the other hand, our finding that the risk of SGA by weight reduced at higher concentrations of Hg in hair remained significant after adjustment for the concentrations of LCPUFAs. A plausible physiological mechanism underlying our findings should be investigated. To our knowledge, no previous studies have reported a reasonable assumption about the direct protective role of low MeHg exposure *in utero* on fetal growth. As another possible explanation, the association between higher Hg in hair and reduced risk of SGA by weight may be confounded

by an unobserved common factor. In fact, biochemical observations showed that selenium, one of the essential micronutrients for fetal growth, plays a protective role against Hg toxicity (Zahir et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2006). Because our findings of the impact of prenatal MeHg exposure on fetal growth even at low levels are not conclusive, we consider continuous risk assessment as important among our population in which the fourth quartile included subjects (n = 59) with hair Hg concentrations >2.2 μg/g, which corresponds to the provisionally tolerable MeHg intake level as set by the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization in 2006 (1.6 μg/kg body weight/week) (FAO/WHO, 2006).

4.3. Strengths and limitations

The strengths of this study are as follows: (1) the assessment of biomarkers of LCPUFAs; (2) the detection of 70 congeners of PCBs that were reported as the most predominant congeners in the Japanese population (Todaka et al., 2008ab); (3) a high PCB detection rate of 98.8%, and the ability to group and analyze them based on bioactivities such as estrogen/antiestrogen, and dioxin-like effects; (4) various demographic, socioeconomic, behavioral, and dietary data were collected prospectively, minimizing recall error; and (4) evaluation with multiple linear models adjusted for confounding effects between demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status, maternal diet, and PCB or Hg contamination in fish/seafood. We propose that additional studies be conducted to assess whether exposure to PCBs and MeHg in the general population is at levels insufficient to cause impaired fetal growth in humans. The mothers included in this study were older at delivery, had heavier weight at prepregnancy, had lower smoking rate during pregnancy, and had a later sampling period than mothers who were not included in analysis. However, we considered that the potential selection bias was limited because we found no difference in PCB and Hg exposure levels between the mothers included and those not included in this study. The children included in this study had a higher gestational age, weight, length, chest circumference, and head circumference, and lower SGA for length at birth than those children who were not included in the analysis. A potential selection bias may have resulted from the effect on healthy children, in whom the influence of contaminants on birth size may have been underestimated. We cannot exclude the possibility that our findings occur by chance because of the small number of babies born SGA. A further study with a larger sample size is needed to evaluate the effects of prenatal exposure to PCBs and MeHg on the later growth of children.

5. Conclusion

No overall association was found between mercury concentrations and birth weight, length, chest circumference, and head circumference. We observed that the risk of SGA by weight reduced with increasing mercury concentration in hair in regression analyses with adjustment for polyunsaturated fatty acids. In Japanese pregnant women, who are known to have a high frequency of fish consumption, the beneficial effect of essential nutrition may mask the adverse effects of MeHg on birth size, as was observed in a previous European study. On the other hand, we cannot exclude the possibility that prenatal MeHg exposure may adversely influence fetal growth even at low levels; therefore, a follow-up study is needed to evaluate the effect of prenatal MeHg exposure on the later growth of children. The concentrations of estrogenic, antiestrogenic, dioxin-like, and NDL PCBs had no association with birth weight, length, chest circumference, head circumference, and SGA risk.

Conflicts of interest and source of funding

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Effects of Prenatal Leydig Cell Function on the Ratio of the Second to Fourth Digit Lengths in School-Aged Children

Takahiko Mitsui[1]*, Atsuko Araki[2], Ayako Imai[1], Sakiko Sato[1], Chihiro Miyashita[2], Sachiko Ito[2], Seiko Sasaki[3], Takeya Kitta[1], Kimihiko Moriya[1], Kazutoshi Cho[4], Keita Morioka[4], Reiko Kishi[2], Katsuya Nonomura[1]

1 Department of Urology, Hokkaido University Graduate School of Medicine, Sapporo, Hokkaido, Japan, **2** Hokkaido University Center for Environmental and Health Sciences, Sapporo, Hokkaido, Japan, **3** Department of Public Health, Hokkaido University Graduate School of Medicine, Sapporo, Hokkaido, Japan, **4** Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Hokkaido University Graduate School of Medicine, Sapporo, Hokkaido, Japan

* mitsui68@med.hokudai.ac.jp

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Abstract

Prenatal sex hormones can induce abnormalities in the reproductive system and adversely impact on genital development. We investigated whether sex hormones in cord blood influenced the ratio of the second to fourth digit lengths (2D/4D) in school-aged children. Of the 514 children who participated in a prospective cohort study on birth in Sapporo between 2002 and 2005, the following sex hormone levels were measured in 294 stored cord blood samples (135 boys and 159 girls); testosterone (T), estradiol (E), progesterone, LH, FSH, inhibin B, and insulin-like factor 3 (INSL3). A total of 350 children, who were of school age and could be contacted for this survey, were then requested via mail to send black-and-white photocopies of the palms of both the left and right hands. 2D/4D was calculated in 190 children (88 boys and 102 girls) using photocopies and derived from participants with the characteristics of older mothers, a higher annual household income, higher educational level, and fewer smokers among family members. 2D/4D was significantly lower in males than in females ($p<0.01$). In the 294 stored cord blood samples, T, T/E, LH, FSH, Inhibin B, and INSL3 levels were significantly higher in samples collected from males than those from females. A multivariate regression model revealed that 2D/4D negatively correlated with INSL3 in males and was significantly higher in males with <0.32 ng/mL of INSL3 ($p<0.01$). No correlations were observed between other hormones and 2D/4D. In conclusion, 2D/4D in school-aged children, which was significantly lower in males than in females, was affected by prenatal Leydig cell function.

analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

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Introduction

The ratio of the 2nd finger to 4th finger lengths (2D/4D) in humans has been reported to be smaller in males than in females [1]. This sexual difference has been attributed to the prenatal hormonal environment, such as exposure to higher levels of androgens and some other gonad-specific hormones [2] through androgen receptors, which are located in fetal cartilaginous tissue [3]. This hypothesis for the underlying mechanism for this difference is supported by the following findings; lower 2D/4D in girls with congenital adrenal hyperplasia [4], higher 2D/4D in individuals with complete androgen insensitivity syndrome [5], and the existence of a relationship between 2D/4D and polymorphisms in androgen receptors [6].

Prenatal exposure to sex hormones is known to affect human development, including that of the fetal digits, and one of the most important periods for the fetus is from the first to second trimester of pregnancy. Although most organ systems are developing during this period, the endocrine control systems have already been formed. The sexual difference in 2D/4D has already been established during early prenatal development under the influence of sex hormones [7, 8], and 2D/4D is considered to be stable after the early prenatal stages. Therefore, 2D/4D has been used as an easily measurable and stable anthropometric index of prenatal androgen exposure. However, the mechanism responsible for the sexual difference in 2D/4D has not yet been elucidated in detail.

There is currently no established approach for measuring prenatal hormone exposure when investigating the relationship between 2D/4D and the hormonal environment earlier in pregnancy in order to elucidate the mechanism underlying the sexual difference in 2D/4D; measuring prenatal hormone levels is difficult and not feasible for ethical reasons during a normal pregnancy. On the other hand, umbilical cord blood is obtained immediately after delivery, and its hormone levels are broadly considered to reflect the hormonal environment of the fetus at late gestation [9, 10]. Previous studies have been performed using cord blood to investigate the relationship between fetal hormonal exposure and human development [11–13].

In the present study, as a part of the Sapporo Cohort, Hokkaido Study on Environment and Child Health [14, 15], we investigated whether sex hormone levels in cord blood influenced 2D/4D in school-aged children.

Participants and Methods

Participants

This prospective birth cohort study was based on the Sapporo Cohort, Hokkaido Study on Environment and Child Health [14, 15]. Study details regarding the population, data collection, sampling of biological specimens, and contents of the questionnaire have been described previously [14, 15]. Briefly, native Japanese women living in Sapporo City or its surrounding areas were enrolled into the study at 23–35 weeks of gestation at Sapporo Toho Hospital between July 2002 and October 2005. Of the 1796 women approached, 25% were excluded as they decided to enroll in the Japanese cord blood bank or deliver the baby at another hospital; therefore, 514 pregnant women were enrolled in this cohort study (participation rate of 28.6%).

This study was approved by the Institutional Ethical Board for Epidemiological Studies at Hokkaido University Graduate School of Medicine and Hokkaido University Center for Environmental and Health Sciences. All participants provided written informed consent. Informed consent on behalf of the children enrolled was provided by their parents.

Measurement of 2D/4D

Ten out of 514 participants were excluded from the study due to miscarriage, stillbirth, relocation, or voluntary withdrawal from the study before delivery. As 7 sets of twins were born, a total of 511 children (246 males and 265 females) were finally included in the Sapporo Cohort study. Of these, 350 children (68.1%), who are currently school-aged and could be contacted for this survey, were requested via a mail to send black-and-white photocopies of the palms of both the left and right hands. Measurements of digits were made from photocopies of the ventral surface of the right and left hands. The participants were instructed to straighten their fingers and lightly place their hands palm down on the photocopy machine. Measurements were made to the nearest 0.5 mm from the mid-point of the finger crease proximal to the palm to the tip of the finger using steel Vernier calipers. The ratio was calculated by dividing the length of the second digit by that of the fourth digit[1]. All measurements were taken twice by two observers blinded to participants' information in order to confirm the measurements obtained.

Sex hormone measurements in cord blood samples

At the time of delivery, a blood sample of 10–30mL was collected from the umbilical cord and stored at -80°C for later analysis.

The following hormone levels in 294 stored cord blood samples (135 boys and 159 girls) were measured. Testosterone (T), estradiol (E), and progesterone (P) levels were measured using LC-MS/MS [16, 17]. An immunoradiometric assay was used to measure luteinizing hormone (LH) (Spac-S LH Kit, TFB, Inc., Tokyo Japan) and follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH) levels (Spac-S FSH Kit, TFB, Inc., Tokyo Japan). Inhibin B levels were measured using an enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (Inhibin B Gen II ELISA, Beckman Coulter, Inc., CA, USA). An enzyme immunoassay (Insulin-like 3 (INSL3) / RLF (Human)—EIA Kit, Phoenix Pharmaceuticals, Inc. CA, USA) was used to measure INSL3 levels. INSL3 was measured in males because it reflects Leydig cell function. It was also measured in 20 randomly selected samples from females. All sex hormone measurements were performed by Aska Pharma Medical Co., Ltd. (Kanagawa, Japan).

Statistical analyses

Data on the characteristics of participants, 2D/4D, and sex hormone levels were presented as a group mean ± standard deviation and were analyzed between groups using a one-way ANOVA. Sex hormones were converted to a log10 scale as these data did not fall into a normal distribution. A half of the detection limit was used when levels were below the detection limit for individual hormones. The relationship between 2D/4D and sex hormone levels in cord blood samples was calculated using a multiple linear regression analysis. The inclusion of covariates was based on biological considerations and adjustments were made for maternal age (continuous), birth weight (continuous), maternal smoking during pregnancy (yes or no), and maternal alcohol consumption during pregnancy (yes or no). All statistical analyses were performed using JMP pro 10 (SAS institute Inc., NC, USA), except for the intra-class correlation coefficient for right and left 2D/4D measurements, which was calculated using SPSS statistics version 19 (IBM, IL, USA). Significance levels were set to 0.05 for all comparisons.

Results

1) Patient characteristics

A total of 190 children from the 189 participants, including 88 males and 102 females, sent back photocopies of their palms. The characteristics of the participants and their children who

sent back photocopies for 2D/4D were compared to their children without 2D/4D. 2D/4D was derived from the following participants; older mothers, a higher annual household income, higher educational level, and fewer smokers among family members. No significant differences were observed in gender, birth weight, or gestational age (Table 1).

2) 2D/4D

In all right hand, left hand, and mean values, 2D/4D was significantly higher in females than in males (Fig. 1). 2D/4D fell into a normal distribution in all right hand, left hand, and mean values.

The intra-class correlation coefficient (1, 2) for right and left 2D/4D measurements was 0.720 (95% confidence interval: 0.627–0.789). The mean 2D/4D value in both hands was used to determine its relationship with sex hormones as a representative value of each participant.

3) Sex hormones in cord blood samples

T, E, P, and INSL3 were detected in all samples. INSL3 was only measured in 20 randomly selected samples from females. The detection percentages of LH in males and females were 25.7% and 0.7%, respectively, while those of FSH in males and females were 46.8% and 0%, respectively. Inhibin B was detected in 99.2% of males and 26% of females (Table 2). The mean intra-assay and inter-assay coefficients of variations in terms of sex hormone measurements were as follows; T: 1.4%–5.3%, E: 3.2%–11.3%, P: 2.7%–6.3%, LH: 4.8%–6.5%, FSH: 2.3%–3.7%, Inhibin B: < 3.8%, and INSL3: 1%–5% in the mean intra-assay coefficients of variations, and T: 3.4%–5.1%, E:

Table 1. Patient characteristics.

		2D/4D (+)		2D/4D (-)		
		n	Mean ± SD	n	Mean ± SD	
Maternal characteristics						
Age at delivery (years old)		189	31.4 ± 4.2	315	30.7 ± 5.2	**
Pre-pregnancy BMI (m^2/kg)		189	21.0 ± 3.1	315	21.6 ± 3.4	
Parity	Primiparous	92 (48.7)		148 (47.0)		
	Multiparous	97 (51.3)		167 (53.0)		
Annual house hold income (million yen per year)	<5	108 (57.1)		237 (75.2)		**
	≥5	81 (42.9)		78 (24.8)		
Educational level (years)	≤12	58 (30.7)		166 (52.7)		**
	≥13	131 (69.3)		149 (47.3)		
Smoking during pregnancy	Nonsmoker	174 (92.1)		232 (73.7)		**
	Smoker	12 (7.9)		83 (26.3)		
Alcohol consumption during pregnancy	Nondrinker	120 (63.5)		235 (74.6)		
	Drinker	69 (36.5)		80 (25.4)		
Infant characteristics						
Gender	Males	88 (46.3)		158 (49.2)		
	Females	102 (53.7)		163 (50.8)		
Birth weight (g)		190	3037.6 ± 379.7	321	3003.9 ± 444.5	
Gestational age (weeks)		190	38.9 ± 1.5	321	38.6 ± 1.6	

The values in brackets represent percentages.

**: $p<0.01$.

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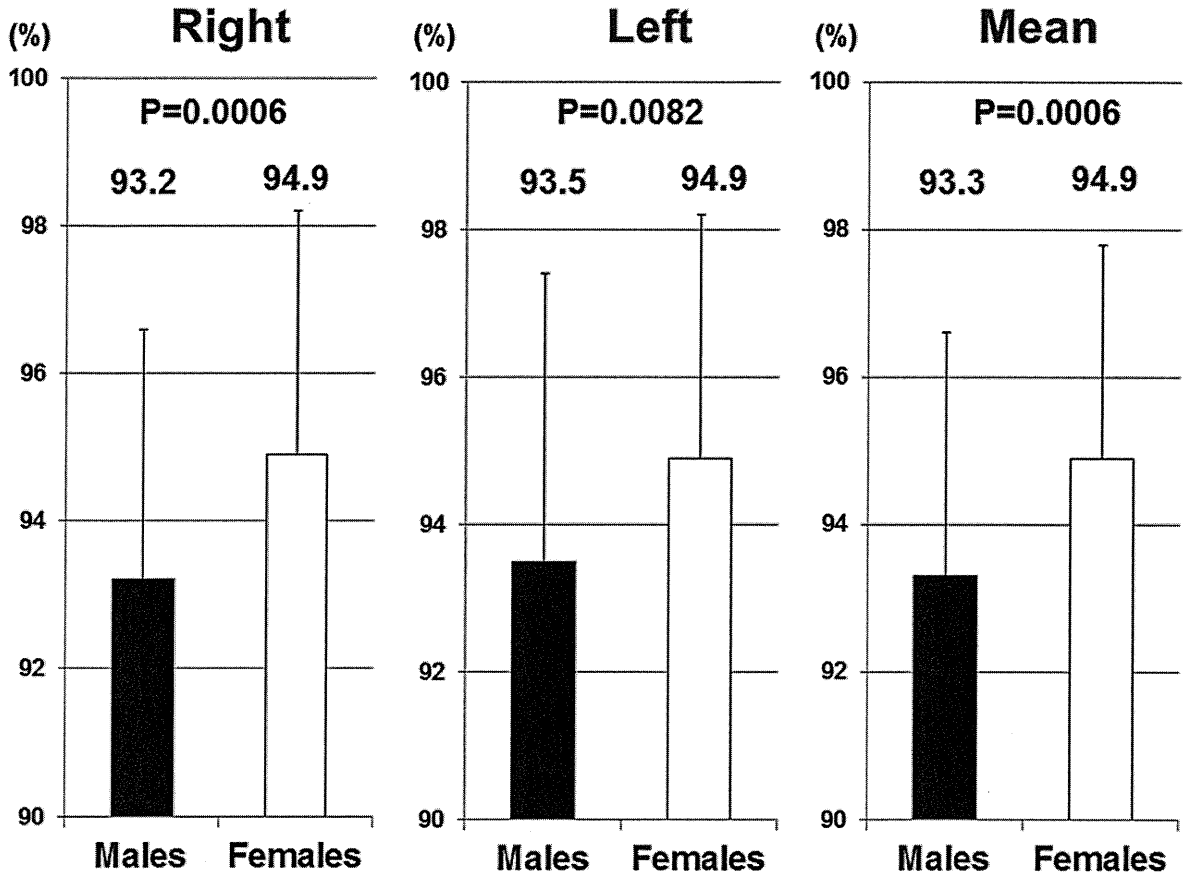

Fig 1. 2D/4D in right hands, left hands, and mean values. 2D/4D in right hands, left hands, and mean values were significantly higher in females than in males.

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Table 2. Sex hormone levels in cord blood in males and females.

		Males				Females				
	DL	n	50th	25th-75th	>DL (%)	n	50th	25th-75th	>DL (%)	p-value
Testosterone (pg/mL)		135	98.9	76.5–126	100	156	69.9	51.9–96.3	100	<0.001
Estradiol (ng/mL)		135	4.86	3.33–7.42	100	159	4.67	3.15–6.48	100	0.227
Progesterone (ng/mL)		135	226	184–286	100	159	210	167–276	100	0.184
T/E		135	18.5	13.9–25.7	100	156	15.9	11.8–21.8	100	0.002
LH (mIU/mL)	0.5	132	<DL	<DL-0.82	25.7	155	<DL	<DL-<DL	0.7	<0.001
FSH (mIU/mL)	0.5	132	<DL	<DL-0.66	46.8	154	<DL	<DL-<DL	0.0	<0.001
Inhibin B (pg/mL)	11	134	44.0	33.9–58.3	99.2	159	<DL	<DL-11.8	26.0	<0.001
INSL3 (ng/mL)	0.01	132	0.29	0.25–0.34	100	20	0.18	0.17–0.23	100	<0.001

DL: detection limit.

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4.8%–9.5%, P: 4.7%–6.0%, LH: 7.2%–26.0%, FSH: 5.4%–6.7%, Inhibin B: < 5.6%, and INSL3: 6%–15.0% in the mean inter-assay coefficients of variations.

The median concentrations of T, LH, FSH, Inhibin B, and INSL3, which indicate androgen activity, were significantly higher in males than in females (Table 2).

4) Relationship between 2D/4D and sex hormones

No significant differences were observed in the hormone levels of children who sent back photocopies for 2D/4D and those who did not (Table 3).

A multivariate regression model showed that 2D/4D negatively correlated with INSL3 only in males. Regarding the other sex hormones in both males and females, no correlations were observed with 2D/4D (Table 4). The application of 0.32 ng/mL of INSL3 from the receiver operating characteristic curve as a cut-off value revealed that 2D/4D was significantly higher in males with <0.32 ng/mL of INSL3 ($p<0.01$) (Fig. 2). This result indicated that 2D/4D could be affected by prenatal Leydig cell function.

Table 3. Sex hormones in cord blood and 2D/4D.

	Males					Females				
	2D/4D (+)		2D/4D (-)			2D/4D (+)		2D/4D (-)		
	n	50th Min Max	n	50th Min Max	p-value	n	50th Min Max	n	50th Min Max	p-value
Testosterone (pg/mL)	45	90.9 12.2 483	90	101 5.45 620	0.240	69	64.9 12.3 457	87	71.3 6.25 168	0.255
Estradiol (ng/mL)	45	4.05 1.91 26.6	90	5.38 0.01 33.5	0.200	72	4.86 1.66 31.2	87	4.42 1.44 17.4	0.143
Progesterone (ng/mL)	45	183 13.7 455	90	234 0.43 471	0.378	72	201 6.25 467	87	216 8.86 514	0.457
T/E	45	21.7 2.05 52.1	90	17.5 2.73 21839	0.477	69	15.7 1.9 47.6	87	15.7 0.68 40.3	0.424
LH (mIU/mL)	45	<DL <DL 2.39	87	<DL <DL 3.37	0.986	70	<DL <DL 0.61	85	<DL <DL <DL	0.263
FSH (mIU/mL)	45	<DL <DL 1.43	87	<DL <DL 1.89	0.765	72	<DL <DL <DL	82	<DL <DL <DL	N/A
Inhibin B (pg/mL)	44	43.3 <DL 90.6	90	<DL <DL 104	0.957	72	<DL <DL 76.6	87	<DL <DL 65.7	0.947
INSL3 (ng/mL)	44	0.28 0.1 0.48	88	0.29 0.07 0.75	0.454		N/A N/A		N/A N/A	

N/A: not applicable.

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Table 4. Relationship between 2D/4D and sex hormones in cord blood.

Hormone levels	Total			Males			Females		
	n	B (95%CI)	R^2	n	B (95%CI)	R^2	n	B (95%CI)	R^2
T (pg/mL)	114	-0.021 (-2.449, 1.956)	0.113	45	-0.209 (-8.080, 1.754)	0.060	69	0.151 (-0.835, 3.909)	0.214
E (ng/mL)	117	-0.070 (-2.893, 1.257)	0.111	45	-0.051 (-4.956, 3.625)	0.022	72	-0.104 (-3.346, 1.219)	0.180
P (ng/mL)	117	0.036 (-1.323, 1.977)	0.107	45	-0.020 (-4.461, 3.971)	0.020	72	0.078 (-1.114, 3.647)	0.175
T/E	114	0.010 (-2.259, 2.514)	0.113	45	-0.138 (-6.331, 2.650)	0.036	69	0.200 (-0.440, 5.190)	0.228
LH (mIU/mL)	115	0.017 (-2.167, 2.610)	0.104	45	0.207 (-1.335, 5.346)	0.055	70	0.126 (-6.313, 21.64)	0.180
FSH (mIU/mL)	117	-0.038 (-3.696, 2.448)	0.105	45	0.180 (-2.162, 7.177)	0.048		N/A	N/A
INSL3 (ng/mL)		N/A N/A	N/A	44	-0.377* (-30.17, -2.318)	0.145		N/A N/A	N/A
Inhibin B (pg/mL)	116	-0.139 (-2.238, 0.331)	0.124	44	-0.068 (-5.877, 3.891)	0.024	72	-0.082 (-1.387, 2.732)	0.172

*: $p<0.05$,
N/A: not applicable.

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Discussion

In the present study, the ratio of the digit length of the 2nd finger to that of the 4th finger, which has been used as an easily measurable and stable anthropometric index of prenatal exposure to androgens, was calculated in school-aged children, and sex hormone levels in cord blood samples were then measured. The levels of sex hormones indicating androgen activity in cord blood were significantly higher in males than in females. 2D/4D was significantly higher in females than in males, and negatively correlated with INSL3 only in males.

The biosynthesis of testosterone hypothetically occurs at a gestational age of 9 weeks, whereas 2D/4D dimorphism appears as early as at 14 weeks of gestation [7, 8], which indicated that early levels of sex hormones can influence 2D/4D. A previous study reported that 2D/4D reflected a genetic background subjected to a given level of exposure to prenatal androgens [1]. A gestational peak in testosterone production due to the development of Leydig cells occurred between 14 and 18 weeks. Thus, compelling evidence currently shows that 2D/4D is affected by prenatal exposure to androgens in humans.

In the present study, we used the mean 2D/4D value in both hands as a representative value of each participant, as previously reported, because the influence of the stronger side of the hands in 2D/4D on correlations with any factors has not yet been established and the intraclass correlation coefficient (1, 2) for right and left 2D/4D measurements was 0.720 (95% confidence interval: 0.627–0.789). 2D/4D in the left hand negatively correlated with INSL3 (β = -0.414, p = 0.0125), whereas 2D/4D in the right hand was not correlated with INSL3 (β = -0.268, p = 0.1093). We attributed these differences in 2D/4D between the right and left hands to various factors including measurement errors, the relatively small sample size, and the

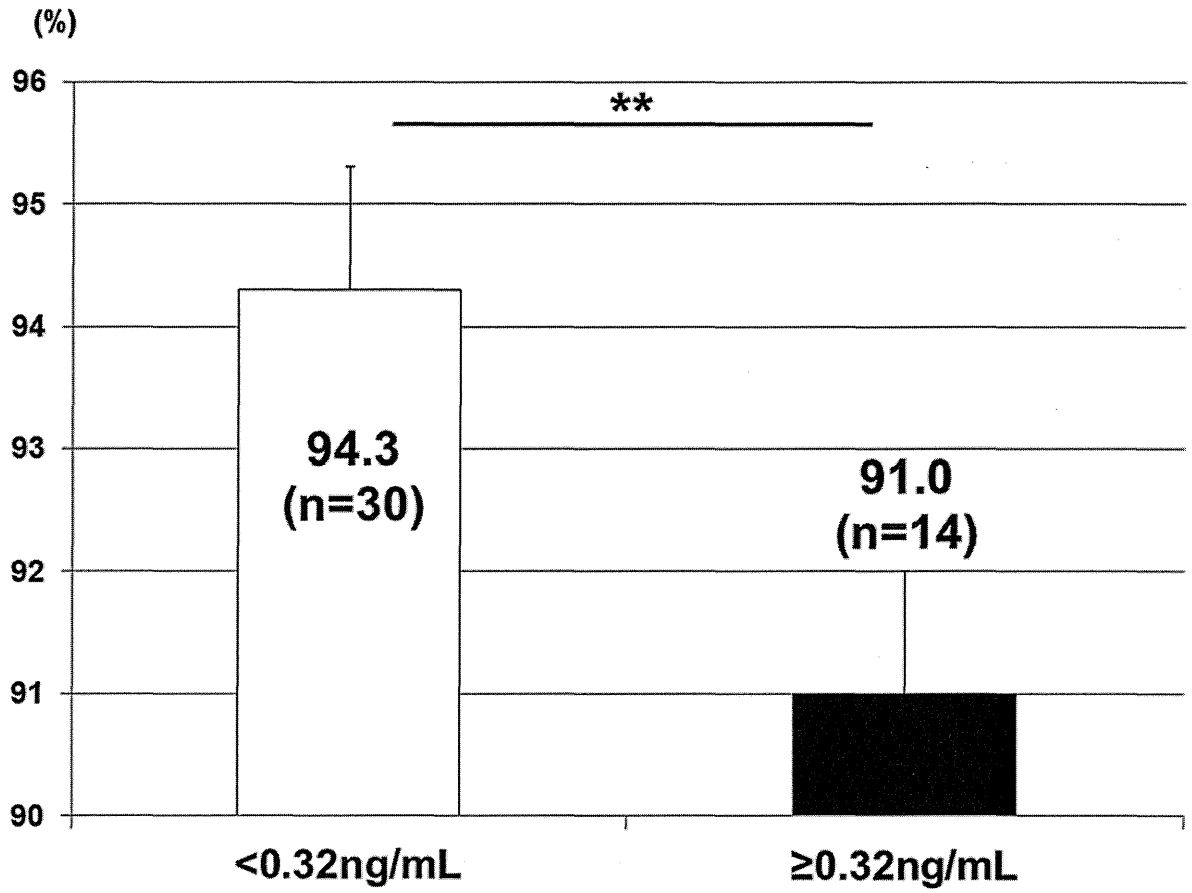

Fig 2. 2D/4D and INSL3. 2D/4D was significantly higher in males with <0.32 ng/mL of INSL3 in cord blood ($p<0.01$). **: $p<0.01$.

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limitations associated with physical measurements. Thus, we considered it reasonable to use the mean value of 2D/4D as a representative value of each participant.

In the present study, no correlation was observed between the level of testosterone in cord blood and 2D/4D. This result was compatible with previous findings, which demonstrated that the concentration of testosterone in cord blood could not predict 2D/4D[18]. Furthermore, a previous study suggested that amniotic fluid, but not cord blood, was the best candidate for investigating the effects of early fetal exposure to androgens [19]. These findings taken together with our results indicated that testosterone in cord blood did not influence 2D:4D or reflect fetal exposure during the critical period of digit development at approximately 14 weeks of gestation. The measurement of sex hormones in cord blood may be affected by obstetric and maternal factors, such as prematurity, labor onset, placental weight, intrauterine infection, and preeclampsia, which have not yet been established in detail [9].

INSL3 levels in cord blood samples correlated with 2D/4D in males. INSL3 is constitutively produced by Leydig cells in the fetal testis, not by other organs, after sex determination [20], and is a gender-specific fetal hormone. The fetal testis is established at approximately 7 weeks of pregnancy and the *INSL3* gene in fetal Leydig cells is detectable by 8–10 weeks of pregnancy

in humans [21]. This period of transition from the first to the second trimester is important for development, and is very vulnerable to a range of endocrine-disrupting insults to male reproductive development. Thus, the detection of INSL3 in fetal blood during mid-gestation reliably indicates a male fetal gender [21]. INSL3 in cord blood reflects prenatal Leydig cell function, which serves in the production of testosterone, and may also reflect androgen exposure during the important developmental window of earlier pregnancy for the digits as well as male reproductive development. In the present study, a correlation was observed between INSL3, but not testosterone, in cord blood and 2D/4D, and a previous study also demonstrated that 2D/4D was significantly related to adult testosterone levels and the presence of testosterone deficiency syndrome [22].

No correlation was noted between other hormones with androgen activity, such as LH, FSH, and Inhibin B, and 2D/4D. This may have been due to more than 50% of the stored cord blood samples being below the detection limit for LH and FSH. Therefore, more sensitive kits are needed to measure LH and FSH. Since Inhibin B reflects Sertoli cell function, its levels may not directly indicate androgen exposure *in utero* for digit development. Furthermore, a previous study using mice showed that receptors for androgen and estrogen were particularly located in the 4^{th} digit and the growth of this digit was stimulated by androgen, but arrested by estrogen[23]. Although it has already been reported that 2D/4D cannot be determined by prenatal testosterone alone and the balance between prenatal testosterone and prenatal estrogen is another important factor in fetal digit development [24], our results showed that T/E in cord blood did not correlate with 2D/4D. Thus, the present study revealed that only prenatal Leydig cell function, indicating early exposure during gestation to androgens, could be implicated in 2D/4D.

As one of factors that affects sex hormones during gestation, endocrine-disrupting chemicals, e.g. phthalates, dioxins, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), and perfluorinated alkyl acids (PFAAs), have been shown to induce a broad spectrum of toxic effects on the reproductive system and genital development in the prenatal period in humans. Our cohort study already demonstrated that maternal exposure to phthalates reduced the levels of T/E, P, inhibin B, and INSL3 in cord blood, suggesting that exposure to DEHP *in utero* may have adverse effects on both Sertoli and Leydig cell development in males [25]. Previous studies also revealed that other endocrine-disrupting chemicals affected the hormonal environment during the prenatal period in humans. Cao et al. demonstrated that maternal exposure to dioxins decreased T and E in cord blood [26]. Furthermore, Hsu et al. showed that maternal exposure to PCBs decreased T/E in boys at puberty [27]. Regarding PFAAs, Vested et al. reported that maternal exposure to perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS) during gestation decreased the concentration and counts of sperm and increased LH and FSH levels in males after puberty, suggesting that maternal exposure to PFOS may affect semen quality and reproductive hormone levels in adult human males. Thus, maternal exposure to endocrine-disrupting chemicals influences sex hormones during gestation, as demonstrated by anti-androgen activity in males. These findings indicate that maternal exposure to endocrine-disrupting chemicals affects sex hormone levels during gestation and induces physical changes to the digits of children. An animal study has already showed that prenatal exposure to low doses of endocrine-disrupting chemicals induced feminized digit ratios in male rats[28]. Further studies are warranted to confirm this in humans.

Polymorphisms in androgen receptors (AR) may also affect sensitivity to androgen exposure in 2D/4D. AR are produced by the AR gene, which is located on the X-chromosome and repeats the nucleotide sequence CAG on exon 1. Furthermore, the number of CAG repeats varies in length among individuals and code for the length of a polyglutamine stretch on the N-terminal domain of AR. Although previous studies revealed that there was no evidence for a

clear association between CAG repeats and 2D/4D [29, 30], the synergic effects of polymorphisms in AR and sex hormones in cord blood on 2D/4D remain unclear. Therefore, further investigations are needed in our cohort study.

The first limitation of this study was that we performed multiple analyses, which are associated with the risk of false positives in the main result of a correlation between 2D:4D and INSL3. The second limitation of this study was the relatively small cohort of school-aged children for whom we had data on both 2D:4D and sex hormones because only 190 (54.3%) of 350 children sent photocopies of their palms for the measurement of 2D/4D. Larger studies are needed to reveal the effects of sex hormone levels *in utero* on physical changes to children.

Conclusions

The levels of sex hormones indicating androgen activity in cord blood were significantly higher in males than in females. 2D/4D in school-aged children, which was significantly lower in boys than in girls, was affected by prenatal Leydig cell function in males.

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Author Contributions

Conceived and designed the experiments: TM AA RK KN. Performed the experiments: TM AA AI S. Sato CM SI TK K. Moriya KC K. Morioka RK KN. Analyzed the data: TM AA AI S. Sato CM SI TK K. Moriya KC K. Morioka RK KN. Contributed reagents/materials/analysis tools: TM AA AI S. Sato CM SI TK K. Moriya KC K. Morioka RK KN. Wrote the paper: TM AA AI S. Sato CM SI S. Sasaki TK K. Moriya KC K. Morioka RK KN.

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